

**Metropolitan District Commission
Division of Watershed Management**

**Wachusett Reservoir Watershed
Public Access Plan Update
2003**

I. Introduction

The Purpose of this plan is to guide and control public access and use of lands managed by the Metropolitan District Commission Division of Watershed Management (MDC/DWM) within the Wachusett Reservoir watershed. The 117 square mile Wachusett Reservoir watershed includes portions of Boylston, Clinton, Holden, Hubbardston, Leominster, Paxton, Princeton, Rutland, Sterling, West Boylston, Westminster, and Worcester.

Public access to and recreational use of water supply lands are complex and often controversial issues. There is an inherent conflict between water supply protection and public demand for access to water supply lands. Human activity on or near water supply source waters can introduce disease-causing agents to the water supply. Water supply managers must exercise caution when considering policies for public access and recreation on water supply lands. At the same time, the Division recognizes that these reservoirs and the MDC lands surrounding them are valuable environmental resources of the Commonwealth that are attractive to watershed residents and the general public. MDC/DWM views its Public Access Plans as a blueprint for determining the levels of access that may be allowed without risking water supply safety and security or re-directing resources of a Division whose primary responsibility is water supply protection.

A. Overview of the MDC/MWRA Water Supply System

1. Brief History

Since 1919, the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC), a state agency within the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA), has functioned to protect metropolitan Boston's drinking water supply in accordance with M.G.L. Chapter 350 of the Acts of 1919 §123. In 1984, the Massachusetts legislature, under M.G.L. Chapter 372 of the Acts of 1984, divided the former MDC Water Division into the MDC Division of Watershed Management and the Waterworks Division of the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA). The MDC/DWM became responsible for reservoir watershed operation and management to supply a safe and sufficient supply of water to the MWRA. The MWRA became responsible for the treatment and distribution of this water. The MDC/DWM protects the reservoir water quality by managing and controlling activities occurring within lands and waters in the respective watersheds. Together, MDC/DWM and the MWRA provide drinking water to more than 2.5 million residents in forty-seven communities.

The MDC/MWRA Water Supply System is comprised of two supply reservoirs, one upstream of the other. Wachusett Reservoir, the terminal supply reservoir, receives runoff from its watershed as well as transfers from the Quabbin Reservoir, through the Quabbin Aqueduct. Flow from the Ware River Watershed, located between the Quabbin and Wachusett Reservoir watersheds, can be diverted to Quabbin Reservoir by reversing flow in the Quabbin Aqueduct. Thus, Ware River flows can only be diverted to Quabbin Reservoir when the Quabbin Aqueduct is not being used to transfer flow from Quabbin to Wachusett (see **Figure 1**).

2. MDC Division of Watershed Management Mission

The Division's mission is laid out in its enabling legislation and subsequent amendments, found at M.G.L. ch. 92, §§ 104 - 120. The statute directs the MDC/DWM to:

...construct, maintain and operate a system of watersheds, reservoirs, water rights and rights in sources of water supply [to] supply thereby a sufficient supply of pure water to the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, and [to] utilize and conserve said water and other natural resources to protect, preserve and enhance the environment of the Commonwealth and to assure the availability of pure water for future generations.

Building on this legislatively-defined mission, MDC/DWM's current responsibilities include:

- Maintenance and operation of the source facilities (including dams) safely and efficiently.
- Preservation and enhancement of the water quality of the supply sources, using education, enforcement, and cooperation to meet State and Federal water quality standards, and protect public health.
- Watershed management activities associated with surface water protection.
- Regulatory compliance with specific directives of the Legislature, such as the protection of the water supply sources, consideration of recreation opportunities, and enforcing rules and regulations for MDC/DWM lands and water resources.
- Public outreach and education to involve watershed towns, residents, and the public to increase stewardship of the water resources under the DWM's care and control (MDC/DWM, 1998).

MDC/DWM staff concentrates on the management, operation, and maintenance of the MWRA/MDC water supply system watersheds, reservoirs, dams, and dikes. Division staff includes professional engineers, analysts, planners, watershed rangers, foresters, natural resources specialists, bacteriologists, geographic information specialists, wildlife biologists, and support staff with a variety of skills and training. Division staff carry out specific watershed protection programs, provide public outreach and environmental education to watershed communities and visitors, and administer and enforce specific watershed protection regulations (350 CMR 11.00). MDC/DWM staff activities are guided, integrated, and prioritized by the *MDC/DWM Watershed Protection Plans and Updates* (MDC/DWM, 1991, 1998, and 2000). Public access management within land owned by or on waters controlled by the Division is an important element of the MDC/DWM comprehensive watershed protection program.

Figure 1: MDC/MWRA Water Supply System

Go to www.mass.gov/dcr/waterSupply/watershed/documents/2003WachAccfig1.pdf

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B. Plan Update

1. Watershed Protection Plans

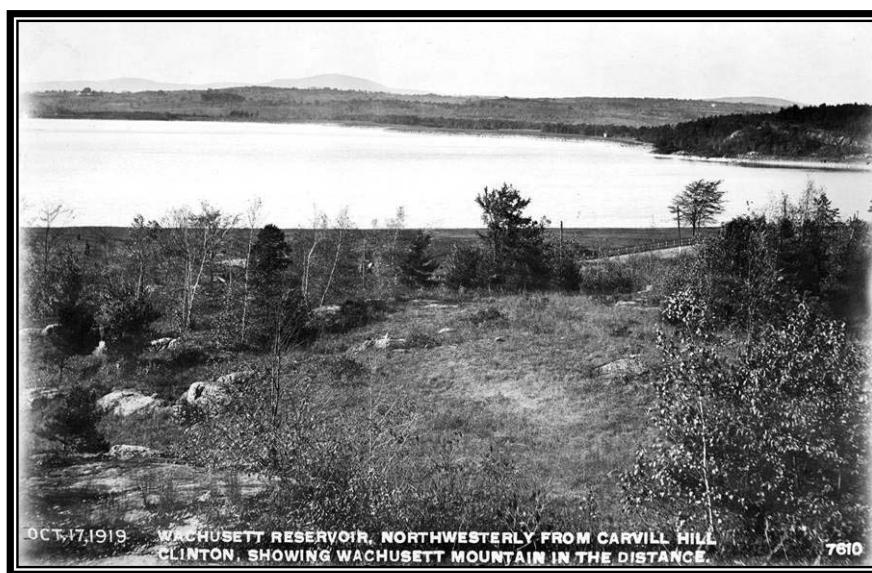
In 1991, the MDC/DWM and MWRA prepared Watershed Protection Plans for the Wachusett Reservoir and Quabbin Reservoir/Ware River watersheds, respectively. These were the first comprehensive plans written for management of the watersheds. In 1998, DWM updated the 1991 Wachusett Reservoir Watershed Protection Plan; the Quabbin Reservoir Watershed Protection Plan was updated in 2000. The Plan Updates reflect the shift of the water supply industry and federal drinking water regulations towards concern for microbial contaminants that can cause acute illness.

Recreational use of watershed lands and waters is a potential cause of water supply contamination and was ranked as a moderate priority in the updated Watershed Plans. MDC/DWM controls recreational use on its water supply lands through specific regulations and policies set forth in the Public Access Plans. MDC/DWM has developed and updated its Public Access plans for each of the four watersheds under its care and control (Sudbury Reservoir – 1994 and 2002; Wachusett Reservoir – 1996; Quabbin Reservoir – 1988 and 1998; Ware River – 1988 and 2000).

2. Purpose of a Public Access Plan

The purpose of MDC/DWM's Public Access Plans is to guide and control public access, incorporating the most current information available, so as to minimize the impacts from recreational activities on the drinking water supply and other lands managed on a watershed basis by the MDC. The federal Safe Drinking Water Act and Amendments, state drinking water regulations, and the Metropolitan District Commission's Watershed Protection Regulations require that public access on drinking water supply lands must be managed to minimize the risk of waterborne disease and to control other impacts such as sedimentation.

The primary function of these water supply lands is to protect the MDC's ability to provide high quality drinking water for current and future generations. The MDC/DWM's access plans detail the Division's management rationale and explain which programs and activities are used to limit and control access to these lands and waters.



Public access, in the Division's management context, is a wide-ranging concept. It includes the physical ability to enter and use land for recreational activities; the legal restrictions or prohibitions related to access or specific land or water-based recreational activities; sign placement; mapping; user education; intergovernmental coordination; public safety; and protection of public and private property rights.

3. 1996 Wachusett Public Access Plan

MDC policy has traditionally allowed passive recreation on MDC-owned lands in the Wachusett Reservoir watershed. In 1996, the Division produced The Wachusett Watershed MDC Public Access Plan (the 1996 Plan), the first written Public Access Plan for the Wachusett Reservoir watershed. The goal of this plan was to reduce the existing level of threats to water quality from public use of MDC/DWM watershed lands and to provide management programs that afford long term protection of Wachusett Reservoir. The 1996 Plan surveyed problems resulting from existing public access to watershed lands. The problems identified included:

- 💧 Dumping.
- 💧 Poor sanitation (evidence of people and domestic animals defecating near the reservoir and improper disposal of dirty diapers).
- 💧 Swimming.
- 💧 Domestic animals (dogs running and roaming; owners not cleaning up after them).
- 💧 Damage from snowmobiles.
- 💧 Shoreline erosion (from extensive hiking, biking, and other human uses).

While MDC/DWM realizes that most of the visiting public complies with MDC rules and regulations, it was determined that new policies were needed to provide greater control over the minority of users who disregard or abuse the privilege of access to MDC/DWM lands. In addition, it was clear that some activities that were allowed needed to be limited or curtailed.

Management recommendations in the 1996 Plan focused on surveillance, education, and enforcement to impose greater control over unauthorized activities. Key recommendations in the plan included:

- 💧 Improve protection of Aqueduct Intakes.
- 💧 Provide greater enforcement of watershed regulations.
- 💧 Provide sanitary facilities at key sites.
- 💧 Provide better signs on MDC/DWM lands.
- 💧 Expand educational programs.
- 💧 Increase community participation.
- 💧 Incorporate current best management practices (BMPs) in site maintenance activities.

Chapter IV contains a detailed status review of the recommendations made in the 1996 Plan.

4. Why Update the Plan?

It is prudent to periodically revisit the Plan to identify changes in existing conditions, to identify

and evaluate the policies that have been implemented, and to assess additional needs to meet the mandate of water quality and resource protection. Legislative mandates also require the Division of Watershed Management to update its watershed protection plans on a five-year basis. In addition, since 1996, the desire to increase recreational opportunities on MDC property, and all other Commonwealth lands, has steadily grown due to the region's population growth. The Plan Update revises implementation priorities, re-assesses the public's recreational desires, and develops a response to evaluate these demands with the Division's primary goals of water supply and resource protection. The policy review and recommendations made in this Plan Update build upon the original 1996 Plan.

The events of September 11, 2001 have heightened concerns regarding security and the need to protect public works from possible terrorist action, as well as to reassure the public that security plans are in place. These issues must be considered as the 1996 Plan is revised.

5. Public Input

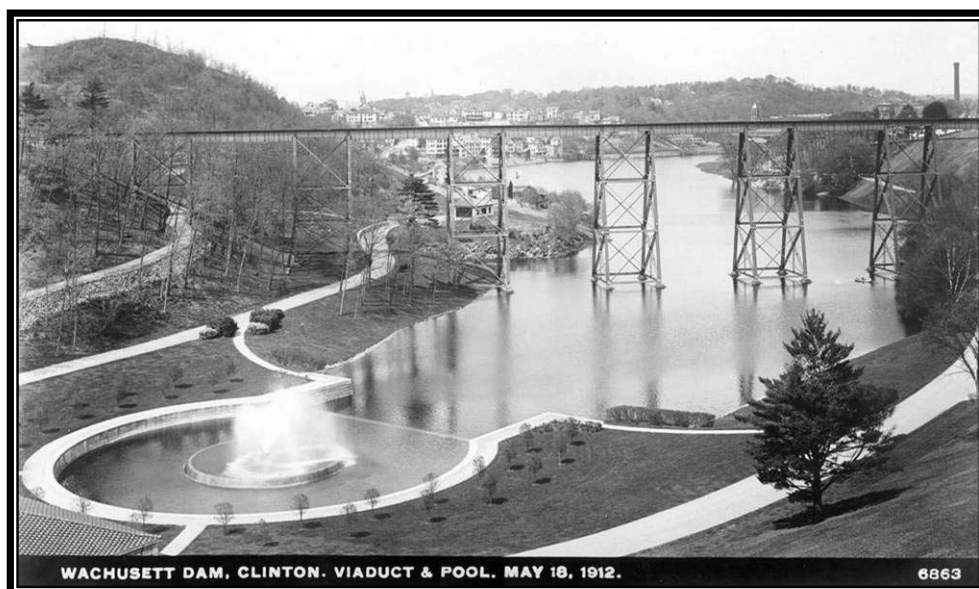
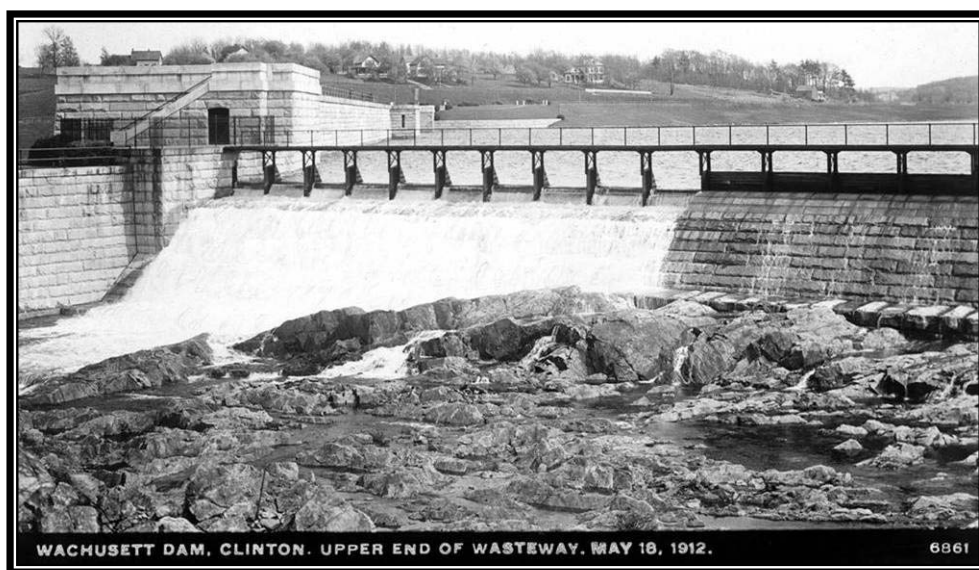
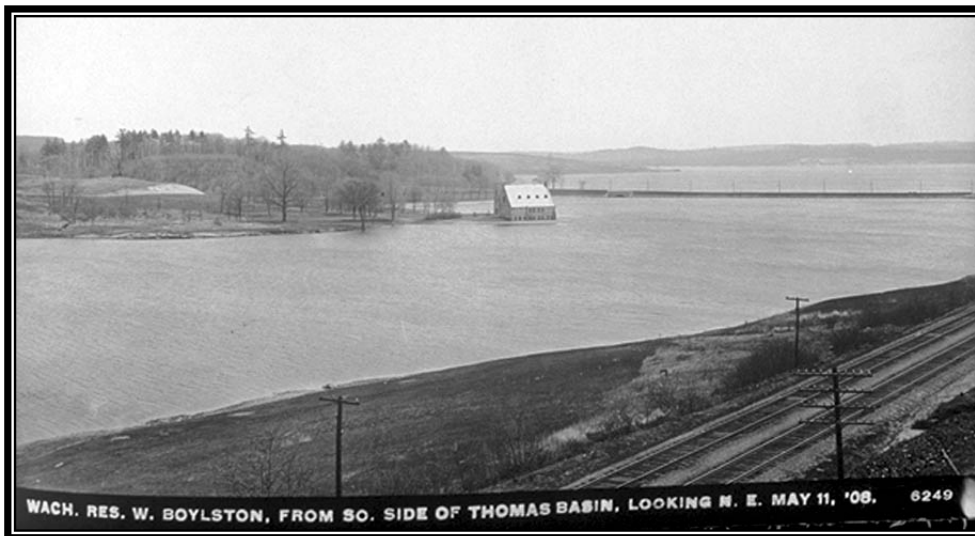
MDC/DWM has found public access management on public drinking water supply lands and waters to be a complex and controversial issue. Decisions made by the MDC may impact watershed stakeholders, such as the water supply managers who must comply with regulations, drinking water consumers who pay for watershed protection through water bills, and the host communities. In addition, private landowners living next to water supply lands may be positively or negatively affected by public access management decisions (Bureau of Land Management, 1991,1993,1998). Formal and informal recreational groups who have been restricted in the watershed areas may be affected. Other interested parties include water supply advisory committees, the actual water supply watershed communities, and countless individual stakeholders.

The constraints and desires related to public access on drinking water supply land are numerous. Public input thus plays an important role in the Division's process of updating a Public Access Plan that addresses the Division's mandate of protecting a drinking water supply while also evaluating the recreational desires of the reservoir watershed's host communities. The Watershed Advisory Committee, a legislatively mandated citizen's advisory group, reviewed and provided input on this plan update. A draft of the plan was distributed to watershed towns and posted on the MDC website in early June, 2003, and a public hearing was held on June 24, 2003. Appendix C summarizes the public concerns and the MDC/DWM response.

6. Public Access Plan Goals

The Division's public access management goals are used to develop the policies outlined in the Plan. These goals are:

- 💧 To protect drinking water resources from public access impacts.**
- 💧 To properly manage a public resource used as a source supply of drinking water.**
- 💧 To protect historic and prehistoric sites within the watershed.**
- 💧 To improve and protect long-term ecosystem health and biological diversity within the watershed.**
- 💧 To assure that public access is safe and appropriate to MDC/DWM's water quality goals.**



These historic photographs show the flow of water from Thomas Basin to the Nashua River.